

Prof. David Smey

Session 2 – Thursday, January 31

Part I - Diving deeper in the musical properties of Medieval music

We spent this session looking more closely at some Medieval music, and we learned a few musical concepts that are going to be useful in the following weeks.

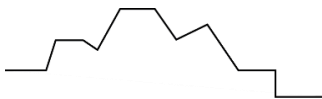
We started by listening to another *Kyrie eleison* and observing the properties of Gregorian chant.

- 1) It usually presents a text in Latin (though our *Kyrie* is actually Greek!)
- 2) Usually performed with all singers, no instruments. (People often use the term *a capella* for this, which literally means “in the church style.”)
- 3) Usually performed by all men or all women.
- 4) Doesn’t really have a strict pulse or rhythm. The melodies flow somewhat freely, following the pauses in the text, and the singers have to pay attention to each other and stick together.
- 5) It is **monophonic**, presenting one unaccompanied melody and no other parts.
- 6) The way they stretch out syllables in the text and give them lots of notes is called **melismatic** writing. (Each place in the music where they do this can be called a **melisma**.)

TEXTURE

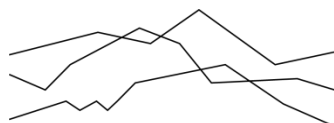
Observation #5 led us to a digression about our three main texture terms. In general I would define texture as “the way a piece is put together” or the “pattern” it makes in “musical sound-space.” These are pretty abstract definitions, though – it’s probably clearer to just look at some specific examples of different kinds of textures.

Monophonic music (or **monophony**) presents a single musical part – everyone performs the same line and there are no other parts. Here is a crude illustration of an imaginary unaccompanied musical line:

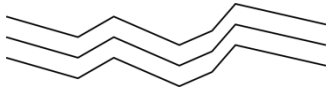


The vast majority of music from the Middle Ages is monophonic!

Polyphonic music (or **polyphony**) presents multiple parts, which are composed so that they fit together in a somewhat complex or chaotic way. Each part will occasionally “work against” the others so that it seems somewhat independent and “sticks out” here and there. I sometimes illustrate polyphony as though it is a sort of musical spaghetti, like so:



There is a third textural concept called **homophony** which doesn't really emerge until the Renaissance period. Here the parts move together to present a smooth, blended sound.



So polyphony and homophony are very similar concepts – they both involve multiple parts. Some pieces seem like a mixture of the two approaches. It is usually possible to decide whether a composer is thinking mostly polyphonically or homophonically, though. We'll see pretty clear examples of consistent homophony later!

Part II - Hildegard of Bingen

We also talked a little bit about **Hildegard of Bingen** (1098-1179), a radical Priestess from the Rhine area of Germany. She has over 70 musical compositions to her name, which is a lot for a Medieval composer. However, this was only a small fraction of her output. During her lifetime she was most famous for writing about her prophetic visions, and she also wrote quite a bit about herbal medicine and other “alternative” treatments.

We will learn one Hildegard composition for the quiz (“O rubor sanguinis”).

Part III - Pérotin's *Viderunt omnes*

Finally, we talked about how society in the later Middle Ages (in the 1100s and 1200s) began to transform. In particular, we looked at the growth of cities like Paris, and the construction of giant Gothic cathedrals (like the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris).

There were some isolated experiments with polyphony before 1200, but the first two named figures to compose significant polyphonic works were Léonin and Pérotin, both choirmasters at Notre Dame. Their dates are as follows:

Léonin (or Leoninus), 1169-1201

Pérotin (or Perotinus), 1198-1236

We looked at Pérotin's setting of the *Viderunt omnes* chant.

So, this is some of the first notated music to combine multiple musical lines simultaneously. It is also some of the first music to have a system of notation for rhythms and to present a lively, regular pulse.

The special term we use to refer to this specific genre of relatively primitive polyphonic music from the late Medieval period is **Organum**. (That's not a quiz term – just remember that it is no longer Gregorian chant!)

***Cantus firmus* technique**

Pérotin's *Viderunt omnes* is based on a Gregorian Chant that was used in services around Christmas. Pérotin puts the chant in the lowest voice part and stretches it out, so that each note might last for 30 seconds or so. Additional rhythmic and polyphonic material is then built on top of each sustained note. The singers even say the syllable they are stretching out, so that the text is also sung in super-slow motion.

This is known as *cantus firmus* technique. The pre-existing musical material is the *cantus firmus* (or "fixed voice"). The part that sings it is also called the "tenor" (after the verb *tenir*, to hold).

Cantus firmus technique doesn't necessarily require this slow-motion, "stretching out" aspect. That's kind of a quirk that is unique to these early polyphonic composers. We'll see that some later composers (like Machaut) let the CF run at the same speed as the other parts. Ultimately, the most important and essential aspect of *cantus firmus* technique is that **a pre-existing part is used as the foundation for a new piece.**